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A phenomenological analysis of the role and well-being challenges experienced by professional International School Counsellors

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ABSTRACT

Professional International School Counsellors (PISCs) experience a range of well-being challenges that are specific to the dynamics of their role. There is a scarcity of empirical research seeking to gain a better understanding of such challenges, along with coping strategies. Therefore, the primary objective of this study was to investigate how PISCs maintain their well-being. The research used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis applied to semi-structured interviews. Eight PISCs were recruited. The analysis revealed three overarching themes: (i) workload and role definition challenges, (ii) available support, and (iii) maintaining a balanced lifestyle. Findings showed that the study participants often have ill-defined roles, leading to role confusion and work overload. A key implication is that systematic provision is recommended for supporting PISCs' well-being.

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Introduction

International schools exist in many countries, offering English-medium education following recognised national and international curricula for children of expatriates and wealthy nationals. The first of these opened in Geneva in 1924 (Coulter & Abney, 2009) and by 2000, there were 2,584 accredited international schools worldwide. By 2020, this had increased to 11,000 international schools with 5.6 million students enrolled (ISC Research, 2020). These schools are often found in countries with limited or non-existent English language national education systems and health services. They are typically staffed by English-speaking expatriate teachers, invariably working on short one to three-year contracts (Appleton et al., 2006; Fong, 2018; Steed, 2019).

Larger or more established international schools can offer services beyond the immediate written curriculum, in many cases incorporating the role of a formal counsellor into their faculty. In the biggest international schools, there may be a school counselling department, with multiple counsellors serving each grade level. However, in smaller schools, the counsellor can be the sole individual tasked with student well-being and mental health support, covering an age range from 5 to 18 years (Collins, 2014).

The role of school counsellor is relatively new in many international schools, morphing from a career guidance model in high schools to incorporate general social and emotional well-being across the whole age range (Borders & Drury, 1992; Villares & Dimmitt, 2017; Zyromski et al.,

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2018). A school counsellor's duties generally include planning and leading lessons on life skills such as time management, sex education (including gender identity), puberty, career planning, bullying, friendships, academic honesty, mental health (e.g. depression, anxiety, eating disorders, coping with bereavement), diet and exercise. In summary, the role involves the systematic ongoing support of individual students as they negotiate their emotional development.

Furthermore, in communities where English is not a common language, the school counsellor can sometimes become the default well-being practitioner for international students' families and the wider expatriate family network, without this necessarily falling within the formal remit of their role (Bobik, 2019; Rickwood, 2005; Simuforosa & Loveness, 2017). There is also often a university counselling element to the role, involving administrative duties following final year students through to their post-school education and career choices, with associated psychological support (Bobik, 2019).

Well-being challenges

Professional school counselling can involve counsellors being exposed to trauma, emotional relationships, at-risk children and adolescents, and complex family dynamics (Christianson & Overall, 2009). As such, it can be a challenging profession within the context of a stable social and cultural environment, let alone within international settings where counsellor support resources are typically less established (Silbiger et al., 2017).

Several studies have examined the role of school counsellor well-being in various contexts. For example, Bardhoshi et al. (2014) researched counsellor burnout and the plasticity of the role, concluding that the assignment of non-counselling duties was a good predictor of burnout. This research focussed on US counsellors and lacked in-depth interviews, but alluded to unclear job descriptions and unrealistic expectations in counsellor well-being. Ostvik-de Wilde and Na (2018) conducted another US-centred study exploring counsellors working in US schools with internationally-themed missions. Whilst the study primarily addressed promoting an international mindset within US national schools, it concluded that one of the main barriers to effective counselling was the administrative workload and tasks outside the specified role of counsellor, which led to time pressures, disillusionment and burnout.

Another study (Fye et al., 2020) explored the implementation of the American School Counsellors' Association (ASCA) standards and how this correlated with counsellor burnout, with the authors reporting that school counsellors in general receive less coherent and appropriate supervision than other mental health professionals. More specifically, Fye et al. (2020) found that a higher understanding of the implementation of ASCA standards (for which an international equivalent now exists – International School Counsellors' Association; ISCA, 2019) led to significantly reduced counsellor burnout in the US. The study authors concluded that:

It is important for the profession to understand and address burnout so that school counselors stay engaged on the job, provide ethical services to students and stakeholders, and maintain personal wellness and professional vitality. (p.61)

However, some shortcomings of Fye et al.'s (2020) study were that (i) it considered only the American model, (ii) 72.6% of the counsellors surveyed were female, and (iii) 83.7% of counsellors identified as white. The demographic make-up within the international school counselling community is typically more diverse than this. Nevertheless, these findings are relevant to the international school community, where internationally recognised standards are seldom implemented and supervision is usually of an educational management nature, rather than making use of formal psychological mentorship (Holman et al., 2019; Zyromski et al., 2018).

A further study (Perry et al., 2020) investigated US counsellors' skillsets in self-advocating, finding that there was no statistical correlation between experience determined in years of service and efficacy in self-advocating. This suggests that self-advocacy is an important competency that can be taught to help maintain well-being amongst school counsellors.

Bryant and Constantine (2006) investigated life satisfaction in women school counsellors, using a sample drawn exclusively from ASCA membership in the US. The study reported that an ability to balance multiple roles in participants' lives had a direct impact on psychological well-being. Furthermore, the study found that job satisfaction predicted life satisfaction and that good clinical supervision was a major factor in eliminating severe occupational stress, a degrading of counselling skills and an eventual withdrawal from the profession. Similarly, Butler and Constantine (2005) studied 533 American school counsellors (77.9% women and 76.9% White American) and found that a high level of collective self-esteem led to lower levels of burnout. Butler and Constantine (2005) concluded that regular professional development and membership of supportive networks are essential to counsellor well-being. Limberg et al. (2016) posited that higher levels of altruism in school counsellors led to lower levels of burnout; whilst still a US-centric study, this is a potential argument for promoting such mindsets in counsellors in order to reinforce well-being.

Lambie (2007) explored the role of ego development as a preventative factor in counsellor burnout, based on 218 American school counsellors. The study found that counsellors with a higher ego rating suffered lower burnout. A similar US study involving 388 primary, middle and high school counsellors found that mattering to specific others in the workplace had a high correlation with job satisfaction (Rayle, 2006). While the aforementioned US-based findings are no doubt of relevance to professional International School Counsellors (PISCs), their generalisability to non-US counselling settings remains unclear. In fact, to the authors' knowledge, only one study to date has directly sought to investigate the perceived well-being challenges and needs of the PISC population (Inman et al., 2009). The study sought the views of PISCs on students' mental health needs, their own professional development needs and their professional interactions with other stakeholders. A total of 58 PISCs completed an open-ended 9-item questionnaire, with an option to add additional information. However, no question specifically relating to the school counsellor's own mental health was included. Nevertheless, the study findings reflected an understanding that counsellors are often isolated and require specialised support if they are, in turn, to support their communities. More specifically, PISCs reported challenges due to a general lack of emphasis in some international schools on the importance of mental health (whether relating to the counsellor or student) as well as a lack of opportunities to keep up with relevant research and counselling resources, including counselling prevention interventions and conferences, development workshops, and direct access to support from professional institutes or accrediting bodies.

A study has been conducted examining international schoolteachers' perceptions of well-being in international schools (Wigford & Higgins, 2019). Findings showed that collaborative and respectful relationships, the appreciation of colleagues and leaders, and strong feelings of belongingness were central to positive well-being amongst participants. However, the role of the PISC was not accounted for in this study, and the utility of the findings for counsellors working in international schools thus remains limited.

Given the paucity of research into PISCs well-being, and the more general well-being challenges associated with working and living internationally, the aim of present study is to understand how PISCs maintain their well-being in the context of the school in which they work and the wider experience of living internationally. More specifically, the objectives are to explore school counsellors' descriptions of their roles, the stresses and difficulties they face and the support which is available to them through school management, professional networks and personal resources. With these objectives in mind, the research question being addressed in this paper is, "What are Professional International School Counsellors' experiences of maintaining their personal well-being whilst fulfilling their roles?" Personal well-being has been defined as "the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced ... when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge" (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 230).

Method

Design

The study used semi-structured online interviews with PISCs from eight different international schools. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because these give the participants the widest possible freedom in exploring their lived experience, whilst allowing the researcher to keep the interview relevant and allow for the synchronous exploration of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a theoretical framework to examine the commonalities among participants' experiences. IPA is a research method underpinned by phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, drawing on each of these areas of philosophy to apply a distinctive epistemological framework and research methodology (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl's phenomenological philosophy provides a route by which to examine and understand the lived experience of an individual. Hermeneutics is the interpretation of that experience, and idiography maintains a focus on detailed examination of particular instances (Shinebourne, 2011).

Within the field of psychology, IPA deals with exploring the experience of human beings as they live it and the meanings that they assign to it. IPA also accepts that the researcher has a role in making sense of the experience of participants, with Alase (2017) highlighting the bonding relationship that emerges between researcher and participants in this context. Thus, IPA uses a double hermeneutic – the researcher interprets and makes sense of the participants' own sense-making.

Participants

Participants were recruited via social media, focusing on school counsellor groups on Facebook and Twitter. To be included in the study, participants needed to be currently employed as a PISC with responsibility for student well-being. Furthermore, counsellors needed to be in full-time employment and working with the K-18 age range. These eligibility criteria ensured that the PISC was an adult aged over 18 years, with a working, academic level of English. As a further requirement, the participant's school needed to be accredited by a recognised international body such as NEASC, IBO, ECIS, COIS, ASIC, GEMS, WASC, or by a National Education System, licensing its curriculum and teaching to operate in a host country. This was to ensure that small private schools with no oversight beyond their owners were not included in the study. Accredited schools employing a school counsellor are obliged to ensure legal background and child safety checks, as well as qualification reviews for the counsellor.

Additionally, participants were required to not have a current mental health diagnosis, although a past diagnosis was not a barrier to participation. As a final eligibility criterion, participants or schools having had prior interactions with the research team were excluded from the study.

In terms of sample size, 2–25 participants are usually sought for an IPA study (Alase, 2017). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) state that "there is no rule regarding how many participants should be included (p. 364) and go on to discuss depth versus breadth, suggesting that 6–8 participants is adequate. This study recruited 8 participants [M = 2; F = 6; ages from 33 to 43 years; mean age = 39 years] working in 8 different international schools, based in 7 different countries on 3 continents. Data saturation was used to inform sample size whereby due to the sample being relatively homogenous and the research objective being narrowly defined, data saturation was deemed to have been reached after 8 participants had provided interview responses (Hennink & Bonnie, 2022). All participants had been a PISC for at least two academic years. Demographics information is shown in Table 1.

Materials

A personal computer was used to conduct the interviews, recording audio via Quicktime Player. Transcripts were made playing half-speed files over a microphone to voice-to-type functions in Apple Pages software. These were then corrected via a word-by-word listening of each interview. Each of the semi-structured interviews lasted for approximately 45 min. Participants were

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

	Participant "Name" (pseudonym)	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Nationality
1	Bill	Male	Caucasian	42	US
2	James	Male	Caucasian	42	US
3	Janie	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	43	Australian
4	Judy	Female	Caucasian	34	US
5	Karen	Female	Caucasian	37	US
6	Mandy	Female	Caucasian	33	South African
7	Shamiso	Female	Black	40	Zimbabwean
8	Tanya	Female	Black American	43	US

interviewed over a secure end-to-end encrypted web video chat platform known as Whereby, between November 2021 to February 2022.

The interview first asked participants to provide a descriptive background to their school size and nature. This placed the study within the context of the specific characteristics of the participant's school and location, helping to understand the scope and wider relevance of the study findings (Morrow, 2005). Participants were then invited to discuss their experience as a PISC, their perception of job stress, their perceptions of support received from school management, their thoughts on seeking external support to maintain their mental health and well-being, and their routines for maintaining mental health. Follow-up questions exploring issues which arose from initial responses were posed as required (Giorgi, 2015). Examples of questions asked during the semi-structured are as follows:

- How do you deal with stress in your daily work?
- What support is offered to you by senior management regarding maintaining your own well-being?
- What kind of routines do you have for your own well-being?
- What support would be available to you if you found yourself becoming emotionally overwhelmed?

Procedure

All participants provided informed consent and the research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' institution. On completion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and all identifying information was redacted from the transcription (participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain anonymity). The transcripts were then analysed using IPA, with the help of Quirkos software for visually identifying themes and subthemes.

Analytical strategy

Data analysis followed the methodological procedures outlined by Willig (Willig, 2014) and Smith (Smith, 1995). The primary researcher began with a self-reflection of his own experiences and was himself interviewed with the question set. The purpose of this exercise was to recognise and explore potential biases or preconceived notions about PISC's potential experiences. Such notions were then set aside in order to engage with the phenomenological process based on an objective mindset. Putting aside a priori assumptions permitted researchers to gain access to the direct perceived experiences of the participants.

Recordings of the interviews were listened to several times and transcripts likewise underwent several iterations of reading. Rather than approaching the data with a predetermined framework, common themes were identified organically, using a content analysis approach. The goal was to find common patterns across the data set. A narrative analysis approach also involved making sense of the participants' individual stories, highlighting those aspects which resonated across the

research. Notes were taken of observations and reflections about the interviews, including contextual information, content, language use and initial interpretative comments. Extensive annotating of transcripts was undertaken, including assigning codes for particular aspects of participants' lived experience. These annotations and codes were then used to identify emergent themes as higher abstractions of the direct quotations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Emergent themes were then clustered into similar groupings and given descriptive labels.

Trustworthiness

In order to demonstrate rigour and transparency, the study followed Yardley's (2011) core principles for evaluating the validity of qualitative research. This involved thoughtful consideration at the interview stage, to ensure researcher bias did not adversely influence the participants' responses. The authors discussed the findings with a view to protecting objectivity and to ensure participants' responses were accurately conveyed and interpreted. Feedback was also sought from participants on the final themes identified (Yardley, 2011).

Reflexive appraisal

The primary researcher is a PISC who has worked in nine international schools over the course of 25 years, on three continents. He held school counsellor positions as a whole school counsellor across the K-12 age range, as a middle school counsellor and as a high school counsellor with responsibility for university counselling. He worked with British, American and International Baccalaureate curricula, including with students and colleagues from over 60 nationalities. The second author fulfilled the role of an independent auditor of the data analysis and theme building phases.

The primary researcher remained aware throughout the research of the potential for confirmation bias to affect their interpretation of PISC experiences and needs. To this end, they consciously applied bracketing (Chan et al., 2013) of their own experiences during the interview and analysis stages, only deliberately recognising their own experience once interviews were transcribed and themes identified and discussed. Thus, notwithstanding this potential limitation, the primary researcher's professional experience might also be regarded as strength of the research, allowing for a reading between the lines interpretation and a discerning understanding of PISC jargon and references.

Results

The data analysis resulted in the thematic structure shown in [Table 2](#).

I've only got one pair of hands!

Participants highlighted challenges associated with their role. Two sub-themes emerged from the dataset in this context: workload and role definition.

Table 2. Master themes and subthemes identified during the data analysis.

Master Themes	1. I've only got one pair of hands!	2. Empathy is a two-way street	3. A balancing act
Sub-themes (and description)	1a. Workload 1b. Role definition (Challenges due to how PISCs are perceived, addressed and organised).	2a. Individual relationships 2b. Online support (The value of formal and informal forms of support).	3a. Regular habits 3b. Social contact (The importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance)

(1a) Workload

All PISCs in the current study experienced being overstretched with workload. As exemplified by the following comment by Mandy, this was sometimes a cause of stress:

... you had to, you really had to manage your time very well and sometimes you overextended. So, some days were more stressful than others, and the same with weeks in general.

Mandy also highlighted how during the COVID-19 pandemic, work gravitated towards the counsellor:

It's very much landing on the shoulders of me as a counsellor: speaking with parents, speaking with students as well as with teachers ... as well as holding support groups for all three, all three different people.

Based on such responses, it appeared that at a time when stress levels rose for everyone in the workplace, more was expected of the PISCs in supporting the well-being of others, with less time available for taking care of their own well-being.

Tanya likewise experienced such workload challenges and likened this to a feeling of drowning:

I felt like I [was] ... slightly drowning in workload and the pace of figuring things out and working all the time.

Tanya gave an example of dealing with a student exhibiting suicidal ideations, in which she felt she bore the brunt of the workload and was not supported by colleagues or management:

Really it was kind of just me, just me kind of telling everybody else what we needed to do because of incidences in the past and because of my cultural knowledge as well.

Shamiso shared a similar experience, explaining that while she initially had a colleague to share work tasks with, her workload grew when the colleague left unexpectedly:

So again, I'm back at being just by myself, so it is quite a load to carry because on any given day I can be in a pre-school class, I can be working with a teenager, as well as teaching my own classes.

Shamiso went on to emphasise the pedagogic difficulty in working across such broad age ranges (Walsh et al., 2002), along with the unpredictability of the role:

It is stressful, and sometimes I feel like I'm drowning, really not doing my best ... sometimes I don't know if it's always effective.

(1b) Role definition

Participant responses were consistent with observations in the literature that within the international school sector, understandings of what the PISC role should entail vary widely (Karataş & Kaya, 2015). Without a clearly defined role, "extra" duties, from timetabling to recess supervision, discipline issues and after-school clubs, can take up time which could be spent directly supporting students (Rohr, 2016). For example, Mandy stated as follows:

I haven't seen a specific counsellor job description. Its more an as-needed, I think. Yes, it was a juggling act.

Judy was required to write her own job description upon taking up the post, as management seemed unclear about what her role should be:

Well, when I came, none of it [was in the job description]. ... I, um, I wrote the job description for the counselling part, from the ASCA model in the US, just a cut and paste job really. It's in a file somewhere. I don't think it means a great deal.

James was equally uncertain about his own written job description:

Yeah, well, job description, that's a bit, that would need updating. I looked ... I mean, it's not really relevant anymore.

Without a relevant and up-to-date job description, participants explained that it became difficult to maintain role priorities. They also highlighted how this led to them feeling undervalued and demotivated, needing in some way to justify their existence within the school community (Wilson, 2009). Janie alluded to this as follows:

I still have teachers who have been at [school] for a couple of years, where they still come up to me, “Oh, I didn’t know you do that.” And so, I’m also like kind of known as Auntie Janie. That sort of explains my role quite well.

Although a qualified counsellor, Janie explained how she is perceived as being an all-round matriarchal figure, which draws her into areas outside of the usual remit of a school counsellor, such as supporting sports teams during fixtures. Tanya likewise found that she was required to perform a role which she had not been formally made aware of:

I didn’t know I was a department head at that time until they changed the role.

Judy also described how her PISC role was not clearly defined:

... because it’s a boarding school, I have lots of responsibilities for residential life and so student activities, dorm duties, and so I’m quite active with the students ... I end up playing that role often.

Participants explained how this mismatch of perceived and actual roles often caused confusion and hesitancy (Chandler et al., 2018). In particular, Shamiso felt undervalued and concerned about her management’s lack of understanding of what she did daily:

It’s like “we don’t know what you do really, but we’re going to call on you when we need you”. It can be stressful in the sense that there is a lot going on in the school that I deal with that maybe doesn’t always reach to the ears of the principals and the Head of School.

Shamiso explained that she suffered from the vague expectations of management, who saw her as a “floating free teacher”, to be called upon as and when needed, rather than as a respected professional, fulfilling a clearly defined role (Ku Johari & Isa Amat, 2019). Judy also felt that the extra time she gave students outside of the normal school day was unappreciated:

They don’t compensate me for time that I take during my breaks to maintain that work ... I’m not compensated for it, nor does my school recognise that that’s going above and beyond, you know, what my contract asks me to do.

Participants explained how recognition of their efforts within an established job description would help them set personal boundaries and effectively manage their time and well-being (Otis, 2009). Consistent with observations around high staff mobility in PSICs (Wigford & Higgins, 2019), participants also explained how there was a need for a better form of role awareness and handover between outgoing and incoming PISCs within the same school. For example, Mandy stated as follows:

[a handover is] something to take forward and give to the new counsellors for putting in plans to themselves ... And the job description part, that needs looking at, too.

(2) Empathy is a two-way street

All participants placed emphasis on the value of receiving formal and informal forms of well-being support. Two sub-themes were identified in this context: individual relationships and online support.

(2a) Individual relationships

When questioned about what support was in place for their own well-being, all participants placed emphasis on the importance of individual relationships. For example, Bill commented as follows:

... there’s a lot of colleagues that I kind of lean on as friends ... I have much closer friends working here and then I would have back in the US.

Participants' sense that "we are in this together" and the shared experience of adjusting to new cultures and languages appeared to promote the development of supportive relationships between certain work colleagues (Mäkelä, 2007). Karen highlighted this point further and drew comparisons between work friendships she benefitted from in a previous PISC post versus the lack of a similar support in her current role:

I developed a friendship with two other women ... they were, like we were ... we're still in touch now and ... here I don't really have that yet and I've been here for a year and a half.

Judy described her relationship with her husband as being the most supportive, given that there was nobody she felt she could turn to in her school environment:

I rely a lot on my husband ... I would say that he may be my only support in terms of who I can go to when something like [feeling overwhelmed] happens.

Judy went on to allude to the pressure put on her personal relationship when it is her only outlet for professional concerns, which is consistent with observations elsewhere (Lauring & Selmer, 2010).

All participants made reference to challenges arising from missing, absent or long distant relationships, due to PISCs being away from normal family and friend networks. For example, Tanya stated:

... so I'm going to leave here a little bit earlier at the end of May and go home for my niece's graduation. I did tell my boss at school I would stab them if they didn't let me go [laughs].

Consistent with Karen's following comment, it has been noted elsewhere (Hofhuis et al., 2019) that it is not unusual for PISCs to miss weddings, births, funerals and other important bonding events with close family and friends, which can lead to feelings of isolation:

... it's difficult to be a single person living overseas. And the nature of international education is that you move every so often and you have to start over again ... I mean at my age it's very difficult to find an eligible partner, so that bit of like loneliness and isolation, it can be very heavy.

James expressed this as follows:

When I came to international school ... there were times that I kind of felt, you know, that I was alone in advocating for students. (James)

In addition to the importance of networks of family and friends, participants recognised the value of professional relationships with colleagues and administrators. Mandy, Janie and Tanya explained this as follows:

[The] secondary principle is very, very supportive, so I could go into his office and talk about my stresses and what support I needed and he would be willing to help. (Mandy)

1. [I] have to give credit to my line manager. I have a fantastic relationship with my line manager. (Janie)

[There is] a wonderful government relations person here who ... helped guide me and let me know what I could do as a counsellor. [Tanya]

However, participants highlighted that while such professional relationships can be beneficial, if they are not formalised within supportive systems, they can become personality-dependent, and thus not a robust form of support:

... of course [with] individual administrators and school leaders in international schools [this] comes down to personalities. (Bill)

Participants identified a further downside of relying on individual relationships that form organically (i.e. versus formal support systems), being that when these relationships breakdown, they can create

a difficult working environment. Tanya gave the example of her relationship with a fellow counsellor and articulated this as follows:

... it was a really unhealthy working relationship. It felt very competitive. As a younger person, I guess I felt constantly attacked as well.

Tanya went on to explain that without a formal system to support her, she felt isolated, which led her to seek professional therapeutic support. However, most participants explained that on occasions when work pressure and stress become overwhelming, managers were typically supportive of them taking one or two days off work. For example, James stated that “I usually take one or two of those days per year”, seemingly regarding this as a normal and necessary part of maintaining his well-being.

(2b) Online support

All participants commented that given the isolating nature of location, culture or language in many international school settings, accessing local support can be challenging:

For myself, no, there's no one in the community that I could go to. (Mandy)

I just think ... so much depends on the city you're in, the country you're in and how, what resources there are locally. (Bill)

I do better one-on-one face-to-face, which is challenging to find. (Judy)

Furthermore, all participants explained that the closeness of expatriate communities makes visiting local services problematic, due to the personal nature of seeking mental health support and the potential to be seen by students or their families. Additionally, participants felt that in many places, these services would be unavailable in English or would not adhere to the same ethical and professional standards as PISCs might expect in their home countries.

Consequently, participants expressed their view that online support can be a valuable resource, particularly in the form of online therapy. For example, Shamiso commented as follows:

I also do, outside of school, online, I see a therapist, partly for personal reasons but also, sometimes, I do talk about work and the challenges of the situations going on at work.

All participants advised that they would value an online supervisory arrangement, which is generally the norm for mental health workers outside of a school setting (McMahon & Patton, 2000; Simpson-Southward et al., 2017; Tan & Chou, 2018). However, only one participant thought that their school might approve of providing clinical supervision for their PISCs, and none of the PISCs' schools currently did so. Tanya expressed her views on this as follows:

I definitely think professional supervision should be a part of our work. I think so much time is spent on supporting teachers that, you know, counsellors need support too.

A balancing act

All participants made reference to the importance of a healthy work-life balance. The discussion fell into two broad themes: the importance of maintaining regular habits and the need for social contact.

(3a) Regular habits

When asked about how they proactively maintained their well-being, all participants made reference to the benefits of maintaining healthy habits and routines (and avoiding unhealthy habits and routines), in order to engender feelings of safety, confidence and well-being (Avni-Babad, 2011;

Gillebaart & Adriaanse, 2017; Mullan & Novoradovskaya, 2018). Participants also seemed to be aware of the value of taking time to reflect on habits (McDuff et al., 2012; Todd & Chehaib, 2019):

I also learned that ... not starting my day checking my email and my WhatsApp and worrying about what I missed the night before, that does not need to be part of my routine. (Tanya)

I tend to offer my time on weekends to students and after hours, which I probably should not be doing ... I do tend to push my own boundaries. (Mandy)

Consistent with the link between routine exercise and well-being (Warburton & Bredin, 2019), regular exercise was also deemed to be of value by participants, with James highlighting this as follows:

... one thing I will do is I get up each morning at 5:30 and I go running, I run about 5 miles in the area and for me that's just time to get out there and be healthy. (James)

In addition to running, other forms of exercise mentioned by participants were regular walking, hiking, dance, gym and yoga. Participants also recognised the importance of restorative sleep:

... we have a good routine, so I get a good night's sleep which is huge for me in well-being. (Judy)

I'm likely to go to bed earlier. I get a better night's sleep, because I know that no matter what I'm getting up the next morning early. (James)

Furthermore, consistent with the positive association between mindfulness and well-being (Shonin et al., 2014; Verhaeghen, 2021) and between prayer and well-being (Buch Møller et al., 2020), other routine practices mentioned by participants included journaling, mindfulness and prayer:

I journal every day. I have tried different mindfulness practices. (Judy)

I do meditation in the mornings. (Mandy)

I pray. For myself and for my family questions for my students. (James)

(3b) Social contact

In line with the established link between social connectedness and well-being (Appau et al., 2019; Gu, 2020; Mullen, 2019), social contact was a clear area of focus for all participants. For the PISCs in this study, social interaction outside of work typically revolved around going to restaurants and bars, and sometimes taking extended weekend trips to locations such as Thailand or Singapore:

[Thailand] is very accessible and ... affordable. A way to de-stress ... A lot of my counterparts, they like to go on a bar Friday night and Saturday night. (Janie)

Participants also valued social interactions outside of their professional network, in which they could let go of their counsellor persona. For example, Bill commented as follows:

I find it's really good to have social groups outside of the teaching ... I try to make sure that my whole social group is not composed of teachers from my school.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore PISCs' perceptions relating to role and well-being challenges in the context of their international school setting. For the PISCs in this study, a range of factors affecting their well-being was identified, along with various strategies that PISCs employed for maintaining their well-being.

The lack of specific job descriptions and ambiguous role expectations were reported as being a significant challenge for participants, as well as a cause of work-related stress and uncertainty. A range of "extracurricular" duties were reported in this respect, ranging from playtime supervision and cover teaching, to having to provide mental health support to school teachers, with little to no extra support available. According to Chandler et al. (2018), "role ambiguity has been prevalent

in the school counselling literature for over 45 years (p. 3)", and competing role expectations have been linked with school counsellor burnout (Mullen et al., 2017). The fact that school counsellors are often overloaded with work, including with non-counselling duties, has also been identified previously (Clemens et al., 2011).

In the present study, PISCs identified personal relationships as an important source of well-being support, regardless of whether the relationship was between the PISC and a manager, other work colleague, or a friend or family member. This is consistent with a study suggesting that counsellors with higher levels of social support demonstrated better self-efficacy and lower burnout (Gündüz, 2012). It is also broadly supported by a study of schoolteachers in general, which reported that the more participants engaged in supportive work-related communications, the lower the likelihood of burnout (Kahn et al., 2006, p. 803). Similarly, a study of teacher well-being in international schools found that appreciation, relationships and belonging were effective in counteracting factors such as weak leadership and heavy workloads (Wigford & Higgins, 2019).

A further well-being strategy employed by study participants was reliance on wholesome habits and routines, such as frequent exercise, mindfulness practice, journaling and social interactions. This finding was unsurprising given that physical activity (Hassmén et al., 2000; Klussman et al., 2021; Ströhle, 2009), journaling (Portman, 2020; Smyth et al., 2018), and mindfulness (Dye et al., 2020; Friedman, 2017; Silver et al., 2018) have each been shown to foster resilience to mental illness and burnout.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned strategies, a central finding of this study was that participants felt there was a fundamental lack of formal systems in place to support their well-being. Participants revealed that this meant that they were at risk of emotional burnout, which is inherent to the counselling role (Berger et al., 2016). Indeed, the potential for dealing with student trauma to have a deleterious effect has a long history of research (Berger & Samuel, 2020; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Sexton, 1999). Although not identified as a theme in the present study, in such prior research, school counsellors typically referred to maintaining composure in the presence of students and having intense emotional reactions later on, with the research concluding that school counsellors require support and self-care approaches.

For obvious reasons, having the skill to self-soothe is fundamental to counsellor well-being, as are self-advocacy skills (Perry et al., 2020; Todd & Chehaib, 2019). For participants of this study, such skills were deemed to be particularly important, given that none of their schools had written or unwritten protocols directed at PISC well-being. Furthermore, clinical supervision, as provided (and often mandated) for therapists in other sectors, was absent for the PISCs in this study. While it is not atypical for such provision to be lacking for school counsellors, it would inevitably result in benefits for both the counsellor and the students they support (Bryant & Constantine, 2006; Smith Hatcher et al., 2011; Walker, 2015). Whilst there is disagreement over the exact format that clinical supervision should follow for school counsellors (Simpson-Southward et al., 2017), it is clear that through dialogue between PISCs and international school counselling organisations such as the ISCA, a clear mandate could be established, with formal recommendations for such supervision and mental health support being made to international school leaders and organisations.

Key implications

In this vein, based on participants' aforementioned experiences and on the wider evidence base pertaining to school counselling, Table 3 provides recommendations for school leaders wishing to implement strategies for supporting PISCs in their work. It is further suggested that PISCs remain consciously aware of the three areas identified in this study where participants reported that self-advocacy helped to improve their well-being: 1. clear role definition and workload expectations, 2. the vital role of positive professional relationships, and 3. professional supervision and the importance of routines and social connections in self-care.

Table 3. Suggested strategies for school leaders to support PISC well-being.

PISC role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt a widely accepted baseline job description which can be adapted to local circumstances • Clarify the extent to which the PISC is required to conduct non-counselling duties • Allow autonomy for the PISC to organise their schedule and time • Make the role clear to the community
Direct support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage PISC networking, through international conferences, training and online groups • Provide clinical supervision relevant to the PISC's role • Schedule regular check-ins to support and become better educated about the PISC's work • Develop and manage school crises plans to address foreseeable developments such as student suicide, natural disaster etc., so that this does not fall directly and solely onto the PISC • Conduct exit interviews as PISCs move on, to establish what has worked and what might need putting in place for an incoming PISC
Facilitating habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide facilities or memberships to enable regular exercise. • Include outside well-being providers when addressing whole staff well-being, so that the PISC can be included, (for example in learning new skills) rather than necessarily having to provide such input themselves. • Encourage healthy boundaries (e.g. no out-of-hours school emailing)

Study limitations

It is possible that the outcomes of this research have been affected by certain limitations. Selecting volunteers from accredited international schools limits the participant pool to (i) PISCs with sufficient time to partake in the research, (ii) PISCs employed in the schools likely to be supportive of the current research, and (iii) PISCs likely to already be involved with support networks and/or associations (i.e. who could thus access the study recruitment advert). It is therefore possible that PISCs least able to protect their own well-being may be underrepresented in this study. Furthermore, the participant demographic profile was skewed in favour of females (6) to males (2), and was made up of 5 US nationals and only 3 individuals of other nationalities. In this respect, findings may not be transferable to the broader PISC population as a whole or to specific sub-sections of this community.

Conclusions

For the PISC participants of this study, a general lack of role description and conflicting expectations often lead to them feeling disorganised, overworked and stressed. Individual relationships were regarded as providing the strongest form of support for participants' well-being, but these were sometimes personality-driven and thus not a reliable long-term form of support. Regular routines, including most notably exercise and mindfulness, also played an important supportive and preventative role. However, consistent with prior research, the PISCs appeared to receive demonstrably less support than their counterparts in state or private schools in their home countries (Evans & Payne, 2008; McMahon & Patton, 2000). Consequently, further dialogue, research and awareness is needed around the value of formal structures of school-led support for PISCs, as well as clinical supervision. Indeed, structured clinical supervision would inevitably alleviate many of the mental health challenges and uncertainties experienced by PISCs, helping them to self-advocate, reflect on practice and be more aware of their well-being.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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All authors were involved in the conception and writing of the paper. Furthermore, we confirm that all authors are responsible for all contents of the article and had authority over manuscript preparation and the decision to submit the manuscript for publication.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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